MAN IN THE NEWS

The Man Who Wrote The Book

WILLIAM MANCHESTER

By FERN MARJA ECKMAN

WILLIAM MANCHESTER, the 44-year-old author of what is now referred to internationally as "the book," a designation once reserved for the Bible, is a lean, high-strung, mild-spoken Yankee with a reputation for self-discipline, a capacity for exhaustive research and an inclination toward hero-worship.

In the months of research that preceded "The Death of a President," Manchester painstakingly gathered 45 volumes of transcribed tapes, short-hand documents and exhibits. In the process, he impressed many of those he interviewed as a most unlikely candidate for a controversy that would pit him against the widow of John F. Kennedy, a man for whom Manchester's admiration verged on idolatry.

"He came to see me on a winter evening at dusk," a prominent Washington correspondent recalled this week. "We talked about the events surrounding Nov. 22, 1963, until 9 o'clock. I never got around to turning on the lights. He was totally attentive, although everything I had to say was peripheral. He was that thorough.

"His adulation of President Kennedy came over. Isn't it incredible that I could spend four hours with Manchester and remember so little about him? He is very low-keyed, unprepossessing. A person of not much visible ego. I couldn't imagine that he of all people would make so many difficulties. He's not a prickly sort at all."

Possibly the Kennedys felt the same way when they selected him as their authorized historian of the assassination, an honor previously declined by Theodore H. White and Walter Lord. But Manchester's former colleagues on The Baltimore Evening Sun were less than surprised by his stubborn—if somewhat belated—refusal to submit to Kennedy editing.

"Bill's career on The Sun was studded with controversy," said a columnist who was Manchester's close friend in Baltimore, but who requested that his name be withheld. "He got into a raging dispute on vivisection here. He was on the doctors' side, and he had them lined up in depth as sources. He exposed a mental hospital, which was a violently controversial situation."

The Baltimoreans maintain that Manchester seems bland, even docile, but only on first acquaintance. "The more releaxed he gets," said one, "the more intense he gets. Which is a funny switch. His is really a very decisive personality."

"Bill has a certain naivete," hazarded another Sun staffer. "Maybe it's a quality that, along with tenacity, characterizes crusading reporters. It gives them a fresh approach that is not at all phony."

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FOR BILL MANCHESTER, HOWEVER, THE DEW is off the rose. His encompassing reverence for the Kennedys, which eventually extended from the late President to most of his clan, has been blighted by the vehemence of their reaction—critical as well as legal—to his 1,200-page manuscript. Earlier this year, his anxiety about his book's uncertain future had grown so acute that the was hospitalized for four weeks.

Manchester is drawn to power and the families that exert it. He did a portrait of the Rockefellers not too long ago, and was at work on a study of the Krupps' war-tooled industrial empire when commissioned by Mrs. Kennedy. But his recent experiences may engender wariness. When Jacqueline Kennedy applied to him the word "hired" as a description of his status as her hand-picked chronicler, Manchester cringed.

"There are reports I was 'hired' to do this project," he told Bob Trout of CBS last month in a dock-side interview just before sailing for London on the Queen Mary for a desperately needed rest. Ominous clouds were already scudding across the skies of the publishing world. "Quite the other way. I received no money from the Kennedys. I received no money from the government.

"On the other hand, all the royalties, all the [illegible]s profits after the first printing of the book, the[illegible]r promised will go to the Kennedy Library. [illegible]bulk of all the paperback and book club [illegible]ill go to the Kennedy Library."

[illegible]ew then that "The Death of a President" [illegible]serialized in part in Look and The Sunday [illegible]London in January, with Harper and Row [illegible]release the full account in March. But

"I certainly cannot feel any sense of joy."

Manchester, who had already banked $300,000 of the $665,000 the magazine is to pay him, looked haggard rather than celebratory.

"All sorts of things are happening to it," he said of the book. His voice was deep and even, with an occasional flat vowel that suggests the Midwest to some of his associates, New England to others. He wet his lips often. "Yet I cannot feel any sense of elation over this. Nor will I permit any literary cocktail party. Because this is [about] a national tragedy . . . I certainly cannot feel any sense of joy, or even of genuine achievement."

His trenchcoat neatly belted, his thinning hair brushed carefully back from his scholarly brow, his gray-blue eyes circled by shadows, he was then planning to resume his survey of the Krupps by translating "400 pounds" of German documents. "Escapism," he said of that effort.

"Because I'm going to start digging into the Franco-Prussian War," he said with a grin. "It's marvelous because I don't care *who* wins, France or Germany. Whereas with 'The Death of a President,' I knew the President. And I was deeply involved, as everyone was. We all were. This is one story in which the whole population of the U. S. and the whole world served as a Greek chorus."

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BILL MANCHESTER LEARNED EARLY TO CARE about what happens, to be committed. The first son of William Raymond Manchester Sr., a social worker, and the former Sallie E. R. Thompson, the boy was only 7 when he decided he wanted to be a writer.

Born in Attleboro, Mass., he grew up in Springfield, where he attended the public schools. He was 18, his brother Robert 4, when their father died. That year Bill Manchester got his first job, as a stock clerk in a department store. At the University of Massachusetts, he majored in English. But there was nothing in the least academic about the work he did off-campus: drug store clerk, toolmaker's apprentice, road gang laborer.

In 1942, Manchester enlisted in the Marines. Before he was discharged as a sergeant in 1945, he was wounded at Okinawa and awarded a Purple Heart. He promptly went back to college for his B.A., then moved on to the University of Missouri for his M.A. At this juncture, he chose H. L. Mencken as the subject of his thesis, which in turn led to a lengthy correspondence with the irascible gadfly of American mores and letters.

There appears to have sprung up between the two an immediate rapport. Invited by Mencken to visit him in Baltimore, Manchester arrived there on Sept. 15, 1947. He was to remain in Baltimore eight years, marry there and gain considerable esteem as a newspaperman. It was Mencken who guided his protege to a reportorial berth on The Sun.

"Bill crept around the city room during the first weeks he was here," said the columnist. "He was very silent, very diffident. And so thin that his ears stuck out from his head. But Mencken, who had a desk here, egged him on. Bill would go back to his room every night and write while everyone else got fried."

Manchester was preparing a book on Mencken ("Disturber of the Peace," published in 1951.) Between assignments in the police districts and courts, he sat at Mencken's feet. "Inevitably," said a fellow reporter, "Bill talked the way Mencken talked, wrote the way Mencken wrote. I guess Mencken was Bill's first hero."

Once the two companions together covered a fire that had flared up in a church whose architecture offended Mencken. As the flames consumed the building, he and his biographer expressed such glee they came perilously close to being arrested as suspected arsonists.

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IN THE CITY ROOM, WHERE HIS STYLE IM- proved rapidly although his spelling continued to dishearten the copy desk, Manchester met Julia ("Judy") Brown Marshall ("I just wrote little things," she commented this week). A tall, rangy girl, she was the daughter of two physicians. Her father was Dr. Eli Kennerly Marshall, professor of pharmacology and experimental therapeutics at Johns Hopkins Medical School, her mother a psychiatrist.

"Bill had proposed to Judy, and Judy had accepted," the columnist remembered. "Then the awful moment came when he had to go and tell Dr. Marshall about it. Bill was so nervous that morning that I filled him up with hooch so that he would go through with it."

On an information sheet he had filled out for The Sun, Manchester listed his politics as Democratic. But next to the query about religious affiliations, he had written firmly: "None." A friend who made the arrangements for the wedding that took place on March 27, 1938, recalls:

"I even got the church for him—the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd in Ruxton, which was my church. After the ceremony, there were lots of toasts and ho-ho-hoing. Dr. Marshall brought out a bottle of Strega. It was the first time I'd ever tasted it, and probably the first time Bill had."

When Manchester left Baltimore in 1955 to serve for a decade as managing editor of the Wesleyan University Press in Middletown, Conn., he had been a foreign correspondent (in India and the Middle East) and had produced his first novel, "The City of Anger," (about Baltimore's numbers racket).

Three books later ("Shadow of the Monsoon," "Beard the Lion," "A Rockefeller Family Portrait"), Manchester embarked on a profile of John Kennedy. At their initial interview, the President quoted a passage from "The City of Anger," much to the author's delight. "Portrait of a President" (Little, Brown, 1961), which Lee Harvey Oswald was to borrow from the Dallas Library, was generally deemed "adoring."

But John Kennedy liked it. And that's what his widow remembered after the assassination. Manchester undertook the assignment with the observation, "I feel it is a trust, an honor." For 10 months, on the fourth floor of the National Archives Building in Washington, in the cubicle next to Evelyn Lincoln ("he was very unassuming, and a very good neighbor"), he immersed himself in his material, catching snatches of sleep on a cot.

"I still wake up at night and hear the stutter of the drums on Pennsylvania Avenue," he told David Wise of the Herald Tribune at that time.

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THE MANCHESTERS HAVE THREE CHILDREN: John Kennerly, 16; Julie, 9; Laurie, 3. But they saw little of their father while he prodded participants and observers to summon up memories of the day of anguish. It was, for him as well as his sources, an agonizing ordeal.

In the old-fashioned, gray house with the red door and the peeling paint that the Manchesters occupy in snow-clad Middletown, on the edge of the Wesleyan campus, tension has mounted in recent days. "No comment," says Judy Manchester pleasantly. "I haven't seen my dad for a week," says Kennerly, padding around in bare feet.

Not far away, as batteries of lawyers wrangled in New York over the terms of his agreement with the Kennedys and finally reached a shaky truce, while his champions and his critics clashed in headlined debates that assure "the book" unprecedented sales, Bill Manchester went into hiding. Possibly he is finding a kind of solace in the remoteness of the Franco-Prussian War, heedless of "who wins."